

# JULIÃO SARMENTO: THE INNUENDO OF THE REAL

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## ABSTRACT

Julião Sarmiento's body of work crosses multiple artistic disciplines and fields. The artist resorts to film and video as a means to reach the artistic expression of an idea, open to an infinitude of interpretations. This audiovisual essay looks at the way Julião Sarmiento works with moving images, focusing in three main perspectives: the word, the (feminine) body and rhythm. We conclude that each one of Sarmiento's works builds a system of codes, of communication, that opens new understandings of the human relation with the 'real'.

Keywords: Julião Sarmiento; Filmworks; Moving image; The real.









1 See <https://artes.porto.ucp.pt/pt/central-eventos/juliao-sarmiento-film-works>.

2 See <https://youtu.be/gP6qSCZe0vY>.

The first retrospective of the video and film works of Julião Sarmento was shown in the School of Arts at Universidade Católica Portuguesa, in Porto, from July to October 2019<sup>1</sup>. The exhibition, curated by Nuno Crespo, gathered 9 works, ranging from 1975 until 2015. This collection of works provided an interesting synthesis of the diversity of approaches, techniques and themes of the artist's moving images works. Informed by multiple visits to the exhibition and the interview I conducted with the artist,<sup>2</sup> I hereby propose an audiovisual essay that looks at Sarmento's practice with moving images. Following the visual, sound and textual elements that compose the series of nine works displayed, the essay tries to understand the specificity and the importance of these specific media in the artist's body of work.

Sarmiento sees moving images as yet another media through which he can convey a certain idea: an open idea, not a concrete message, but rather a whole universe of signs that can be read in multiple ways. The moving images proposed by Julião Sarmento correspond to another branch of the artist's work, equally important as the media for which Sarmento is better known – e.g. painting and drawing. The medial specificity of moving images allows more complete and comprehensive representations of some of the ideas fundamental to the artist, namely through readings of written text, the filming of bodies and temporality. In his artistic constructions a desiring poetic subject vibrates. With multiple references to the artistic gestures, it seeks to reach the 'real', only accessible through fragments. Deleuze said, *à propos de* Proust, that "the world of art is the ultimate world of signs, and these signs, as though dematerialized, find their meaning in an ideal essence." (Deleuze, 2008, p. 9)

Such seems to be the *pathos* of Sarmento's work. Inspired as it is by modern literature – and in particular American modern literature –, it conserves a certain idea of the artist as someone of an extraordinary sensibility and capability to represent life – even if constrained by perception. On the other hand, the centrality of certain representations of *eros*, of suspended sexuality, seemed to merge with an acknowledged interest with psychoanalysis. Hence, the role of sexuality in Sarmento points towards the discovery of the world and the other, and at the same time, of the self. Two of the perspectives that I took in analysing the artist's works, come from this intertwinement of literature, psychoanalysis and art. Namely, the place of the written and spoken word, and the place of the female body.

Throughout the body of work of Julião Sarmento the written word occupies an important position. In his moving image works, such is evident not only by the centrality of the title – the artist states that the title transforms the whole work and its meaning, as if it was "ten more frames"<sup>3</sup>–, often referencing particular works of literature or authors; but also by filming some the characters reading texts (e.g. *Wastelands* by T.S.Eliot in *Toile* [2006]; the children's story *The House that Jack Built and a chocolate cake recipe in Lacan's Assumption* [2004]). In both cases, the use of text is open and cryptic, partially owing to a Lacanian understanding of language and the 'real':

3 See footnote number 2.

The 'real' emerges as a third term, linked to the symbolic and the imaginary: it stands for what is neither symbolic nor imaginary, and remains foreclosed from the analytic experience, which is an experience of speech. (Sheridan, 1977, p. 280)

Sarmiento's work often recurs to *imagos of a fragmented body* (Lacan, 2017, p.9), almost always feminine, a concept that symbolizes a subject as an "incipient collection of desires". Looking at the bodies presented by Sarmiento helps us thinking about the desire to discover the other and the 'real', as he places the female body in the centre of a reflection on desire and its psychoanalytical and literary implication (Tavares, n.d.). The representations of the female body are often devoid of identity, as the artist focuses on generic representations of gender<sup>4</sup>, but in these moving images they gain a performativity, a sense of movement and effort that express different feelings and ideas, and often have a sexual component. While the body might seem "reified as a mere object of contemplation", in particular when fragmented, we can understand this body-landscape "not as a passive object of desire, but rather as an erotic subject that fascinates and embodies" the viewer who observes it (Carmo, 2013, p. 145).

Finally, to analyse the specificities of the moving image the essay focuses in the use the artist makes of temporality and rhythm. As the "dominant, all-powerful factor of the film image is rhythm, expressing the course of time within the frame" (Tarkovsky, 1984, p.113), this dimension seems to occupy the main drive of some of the works: in *1,2,3* [1975], the film consists on the passage of time itself, represented on the screen by the sequential appearance in the image of the 1, the 2 and the 3; in *Commercial Break* (2011), Sarmiento films what seems to be the presenter of a television program during a moment of suspension, the commercial break, as she prepares to restart her presentation – but such moment never arrives. Throughout all the works overviewed rhythm plays an important role, and that might justify the choice of the artist for this media. On *Doppelgänger* the ideas of rhythm, time and the future are discussed: in a game of repetition and confusion between two female characters, the male character states to both of them, in scenes that occur simultaneously in a double projection, that "this moment, is the exact moment before the future".

It is not the goal of this essay to interpret the works of Julião Sarmiento, but rather to grasp significant moments and elements that might help us understanding these works more deeply. In particular, how they propose such fragments as innuendos, offering brief glimpses of the 'real' – that nevertheless remains ungraspable and unspeakable. Formally, the audiovisual essay is built from an interpretative text, around which the image and sound editing aims at demonstrating the reading proposed. Again, the interpretation proposed is not closed within itself – it rather focuses in providing clues that exist within the films, that often are decontextualized or hidden in a cloud of symbols, representations and images of the real. By proposing relations between the elements, my intention was to make intelligible the richness and density of these

4 Despite this general aspect still applies to many of his videos and films (e.g. Untitled [following] [1999]; *Landscape* [1980]), other works seem to assume the portrait of characters/actors (e.g. *Doppelgänger* [2001], *Commercial Break* [2011]) that are otherwise absent from his practice in other media.

films, that might not be perceived upon a first watch. Thus, promoting the multiplicity of readings that Julião Sarmento intends to create in his works.

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